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# Papa Abel Remembers -- The Tale of a Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 10: Moving The Regional Office

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# Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 10: Moving The Regional Office

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <reabel@g.com>

Our rapid growth required a move of the Portland regional office to larger and more efficient quarters. The new headquarters building, originally designed as a machining/manufacturing space, was well suited for the handling and movement of books, and contained an integrated front office space and receiving and shipping facilities. This move also required a substantial realignment of operating supervisors and staff. **Dick Peterson** organized the receiving and processing of incoming books and the billing and shipping of books to libraries. **Lorene Dortch** took over the management of the inventory and the ordering of books from publishers, a task now performed daily rather than twice weekly, due to substantial increases in the volume of orders. **Fran Hargens**, one of the neighborhood women **Lorene** had hired, was in charge of a separate standing order operation, which **Ralph Shoffner** helped plan and reorganize. **Don Stave** managed the approval plans. **Paul Sibley** continued to supervise the accounting functions. I continued to place the orders for forthcoming titles. The bulk of my time, however, was spent interfacing by phone with publishers and the now four offices; training new management recruits; and travelling to libraries, principally in the Northwest, but occasionally to other regions, largely accompanied by the respective regional manager.

As a result, the internal changes and restructuring of our firm brought about a rapidly changing sense of our mission. Heretofore, we had conceived of our company as a regional firm serving academic and research libraries, first in the Northwest and then the West Coast. **Jim Cameron's** new office in Denver did not markedly change our view of our place as a regional bookseller to libraries. Our sense of our role, however, began to change quickly through the word-of-mouth librarian network and the continued migration of librarians from regions we served to regions we did not serve. Almost absent any initiatives on our part, we then began to think in terms of North America, both the U.S. and Canada.

Our vision was further broadened by the increasing number of orders placed for U.K. titles that were not available in the U.S. The existing practice was that American or Canadian publishers ordered a limited number of a select group of U.K. titles and acquired an exclusive marketing right to sell them in North America, often referred to as co-editions. The two principal English university presses, **Oxford University Press** and **Cambridge University Press**, still marketed through what were in effect North American agencies, doing no original North American publishing. **Oxford's** office was a straightforward agency operating under its own name; **Cambridge** sold through **MacMillan** (U.S.). After WWII, however, several notable U.S. imprints were

founded whose sole purpose was to take North American rights to a number of titles published exclusively in the U.K. The most notable of the latter was **Humanities Press**. **Barnes & Noble**, still run by the founders, also imported a number of U.K. titles. Many of the U.K. publishers also employed agency publishers to carry their list in Canada, following the established colonial practice. Nevertheless, the North American publishers bringing in U.K. books only carried those titles for which they could visualize a market of some minimal size. The libraries we served, however, wanted broad coverage of the English-language book spectrum. Furthermore, those North American publishers bringing in U.K. titles were far from meticulous or punctual in reporting acquired North American rights or in sending depositary copies to the **Library of Congress**. Thus, U.K. scholarly book distribution was far from a well-organized affair in North America. As a result, the volume of our requests for U.K. titles slowly increased. Since **Reed College Co-Op** days, we had used the old, reliable London book wholesaler **Simpkin, Marshall** as our source for U.K. titles. Although badly hurt by the German "buzz bomb" attacks on London during WWII, **Simpkin, Marshall** somehow soldiered on, and we continued to use the firm. Then **Simpkin** fell on hard times, only to be rescued by **Capt. Maxwell**, in the first of his remarkable financial miracles. The revival was short-lived, however, and we were left without a dependable source.

In the meantime, it became increasingly clear that we needed to broaden our book supply base of U.K. titles. Additionally, we had acquired intelligence about a growing but poorly met demand for North American books in some of the Western European countries. Thus, we extended the vision of the place of our firm as not simply a national scholarly bookseller to domestic libraries but an international scholarly bookseller with a stout base of international publishing inventories, serving an international array of academic and research libraries. As one previous member of our band said recently, the nature and atmosphere turned swiftly in 1965 from a kind of down-home regional firm to a "hot, busy place full of the excitement resulting from rapid change" and "an even more exciting and rewarding place to work."

As a part of this ferment of new initiatives, we planned to open a regional office in the Chicago area with **Fred Gullette** in charge. The Chicago office would act in the same capacity as the Portland office, as a regional stocking and ordering facility, and would initially support the Denver office. To serve the central Canadian libraries and upper Midwest libraries, a Toronto office was also planned; **Fred** would be responsible for the Toronto office as well. (To get a little ahead

of the story, in 1966 **Fred** opened the Chicago regional office, actually located in Zion, about 25 miles north of Chicago up the lake.) As good fortune would have it, in early 1966 I received a call from **Lyman Newlin**. **Lyman** had had a sterling career as a book buyer with **Kroch's & Brentano's**, one of the finest retail bookstores in the U.S. at that time. He had left **Kroch's** to manage a hunting and fishing lodge he had acquired in Michigan. Unfortunately, he encountered a bundle of problems, lost the lodge, and soon was back on the job market. Happily for us, he called to see if there might be a place for him commensurate with his previous book background, and there was, as a buyer for the Zion regional office. **Lyman** was in Zion when **Fred** arrived, and with the founding of that office, the odyssey of **Lyman** as one of the Argonauts began as well.

**John Coutts** also came aboard to train for the management of the Toronto office. **John** had worked for several Canadian publishers/distribution agents as a salesman. He was relatively well acquainted with Canadian academic libraries and knew his way around the Canadian publishers. He did a fine job after opening that office for our company. To complete the story of **John** and the **Abel Company**, he left after only a few years and started his own firm. It proved an immediate success, as he was recognized as a Canadian bookseller founding a Canadian firm at a time when the Canadians had become very concerned about the penetration of the Canadian market by U.S. media. **John's** Canadian firm was the first of the "spinoffs" from the **Abel** firm.

Amidst all these initiatives, planning for an international venture continued. One of the steps was to turn to **Gunther Holtz**, the sales manager of **Springer-Verlag** in Heidelberg. I had developed a close acquaintance with **Gunther** when he came to the U.S. a few years earlier to open a **Springer** office to establish a U.S. presence. Therefore, I had no hesitancy in seeking his help to find a young graduate of the German school of bookselling, still the best in the world. The plan was to bring such a candidate to the Portland office, size him up for management potential, and train him if that was the appropriate conclusion. **Gunther** recommended **Bernhard Starkmann**, who had just completed his internship at the first-rate international bookseller, **Harrassowitz Buchhandlung**, now headed by **Knut Dorn**. We brought him to Portland, concluded he was the right man to open an office in Western Europe, and started his training, another recruit to the Argonauts band.

Shortly thereafter, we established contact with **George Prior**, who had been the sales manager at **Penguin**. We brought him to Portland so he could have a look at us and we could have a look at him. The outcome of

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## Papa Abel Remembers from page 92

these few days was that we both liked what we saw. It was some time before he could come, as he had to wind up affairs in England and, as I recall, to wait for his children to reach a reasonable breaking point in their schools. At first, his role with the firm was thought to be that of selling U.K. books to libraries in North America as well as managing the U.K. orders and inventory. After a few months, these sales endeavors proved to be far less rewarding than we had anticipated.

Meanwhile, we had accumulated a fairly substantial inventory of U.K. books in anticipation of stocking an inventory dating back about a year to sustain this marketing program. (The idea of the one-year-old inventory was arrived at by looking at the delays in journal reviews and LC cataloging we had observed in the cataloging backlogs in libraries and through wide reading of the U.K. booklist and review literature.) To that end, I had traveled to London to arrange with a number of U.K. publishers for the automatic shipment of several copies of every new scholarly title to be delivered to a freight-forwarder near Heathrow airfield. **Boeing** had developed a version of the **707** capable of making a non-stop journey from London to the U.S. West Coast. **Pan Am**, an airline whose demise I still regret, had started a daily Portland-Seattle to Heathrow route. The accumulated books were shipped

by air to Portland once a week. This relatively expensive means of transport was a conscious choice to get books quickly to libraries or to fill our restocking needs, thereby avoiding the 2-3 month delays and the 11-pound package maximum typical of the international book post. However, we now faced a dilemma — how to deal with this poorly moving inventory. The answer was not to come for several years, but our overseas initiatives were launched despite this setback.

Through our work with a number of libraries, each with different collection interests and needs, we had identified some necessary modifications to our original Approval Plan to accommodate these requirements. Armed with this knowledge, **Don Stave** and I commenced with a revision. The changes in subject parameters were largely by way of including additional terms, mostly in the sciences, confirming the redoubtable **McGraw-Hill** president **Curtis Benjamin's** observation about the "twigging" phenomena in the subject areas of science. We made the most marked changes, however, in the non-subject parameters. Virtually all of the previously incorporated non-subject parameters were retained, the principal changes were the addition of a number of new categories and further subdivisions in existing categories. The most difficult category to refine was the assessment of the knowledge level required to make use of a particular title, distinguishing between titles suitable for undergraduates (mostly textbooks) and those suitable only for research faculty or

well-advanced graduate students. The range of sub-categories required to fix reader levels, of course, was fairly numerous. Determining how to designate this spectrum of users turned into a major source of debate between not only **Don** and me, but among the branch managers as well, whom I had involved as soon as **Don** and I thought we had a viable system to share with them. The final form was settled at one of the managers' meetings, routinely scheduled a day or two in advance of the **American Library Association** annual and mid-winter meetings.

In this Tale of the Argonauts, the year 1965 looms large, for many of the foundations of the future company were put in place. At the same time, the mounting financial requirements of our rapidly growing enterprise had made themselves known; much of the superstructure was not in place; many fellow Argonauts not yet recruited; the vigorous move into information technology not yet fully planned; the people and equipment not yet identified or integrated into the firm; and an international presence not yet built. On the other hand, the final sense of the nature and role of the company had been envisioned; the structural pattern of organization developed; the footing for an international orientation undertaken; and the company's place in the world of the scholarly book established. Perhaps of greatest importance, the entire staff shared a sense of their place in the world of knowledge and the excitement of sharing in and building a new departure in the world of books. 🌸